

How can labour market intermediaries secure nonstandard career paths? An exploratory grid

In a context where the classical vision of organizational careers is eroded, this paper explores how Labour Market Intermediaries (LMIs) can secure nonstandard career paths. To characterize LMIs' emerging roles, we propose a multidimensional grid made up of 6 criteria likely to answer the following questions: 1) where do LMIs come from? 2) who is responsible for the matchmaking process? 3) when do LMIs secure career paths? 4) how do they support professional transitions? 5) what kind of information do they produce and diffuse on the labour market? 6) why do they intervene on the labour market? Beyond the creation of an original grid, results outline two ideal-typical ways of securing transitions. On the one hand, some LMIs offer security by reconstructing internal labour markets and consider workers as 'quasi-employees'. On the other hand, other LMIs suggest more disruptive solutions in which workers are supported in their job transitions 'as if' they were 'quasi-self-employed', i.e.: becoming fully responsible for their career. When then discuss the main societal challenges surrounding these two ideal-typical situations.

Keywords: Labour Market Intermediaries (LMIs); securing workers' transitions; nonstandard career paths; multidimensional grid

Introduction

Career literature has developed considerably throughout the last twenty years by resulting into a vast and very fragmented body of work. The concept of career has long been reserved either for some professions deemed as prestigious or certain categories of employees (like executives, experts or high potentials), and has been very often associated with professional success. Nevertheless, the scientific literature has gradually moved away from such a dual limitation to adopt a broader definition: *'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time'* (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989 p. 8). This makes it possible for a career analyst to include all people who pursue an activity, waged or otherwise, without any mention of a normative scale of progression. The definition refers to the conceptual distinction proposed by Hughes (1958) between *objective* (succession of official steps in the individual path) and *subjective* career (self-image and meanings given by the individual to his/her professional path).

Boundaryless careers and new forms of professional transitions

Since the end of the last century, a theoretical stream has developed in management literature on the topic of boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) – or ‘protean’ (Hall, 1996), and ‘post-bureaucratic’ (Peiperl & Baruch, 1997) careers. The starting point of this stream is based on a more or less radical change in the *psychological contract* linking workers and employers, with a shift from a mainly *relational* modality –based on a common involvement of two parties in a bilateral employment relationship– to a predominantly *transactional* modality, focused on short-term exchanges from a service and profitability perspective. This is how the figure of the *nomadic or boundaryless worker* has emerged. According to Arthur and Rousseau (1996), a growing population of individuals navigates from one job to another, selecting what they consider as relevant opportunities on the labour market. These individuals are characterized by multiform careers, free from any attachment and crossing organizational and professional barriers. The boundaryless model is presented as spreading more and more to the detriment of the classic organisational career model, based on the idea of continuous progression within the same organisational envelope, as part of a bilateral employment relationship. Today the ‘market’ is thought to be overtaking the ‘hierarchy’.

Many criticisms have been developed against this model (Courpasson & Thoenig, 2010; Dany, 2003; Lucas, Liu, & Buzzanell, 2006): overvaluation of the most well-off socio-professional categories, predominance of an *agency view* that makes the individual the pilot of their own career, ignorance of the processes of forced mobility linked to the vagaries of organisational life, failure of the optimistic predictions to match the actual statistics on mobility, etc. The promoters of the boundaryless model have in fact been forced to nuance their own thesis by making a distinction between physical and psychological mobility (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) and arguing for greater theoretical openness to the diversity of paths in personal life (Tams & Arthur, 2010).

The fact remains that ‘boundaryless’ career paths may be more and more frequently observed in some professions like the creative industry, consulting or the IT sector. Moreover, the persistent context of global economic and financial crises has led to the development of

multiple categories of jobs ranging from unemployment and precarious jobs to full-time salaried positions (Schmid, 2015). The main common feature of such hybrid categories is a progressive transformation of the traditional employment relationships towards ‘multilaterality’ (Countouris, 2007). An increasing proportion of the workplace operates under such multilateral conditions in which supervision over the work process is shared with third parties via formulas of co-employment or subcontracting (Havard, Rorive, & Sobczak, 2009) or even becomes evanescent (direct contracting) whilst control is more and more focused on the expected output (Cappelli & Keller, 2013).

This growing grey zone of nonstandard work arrangements¹ paves the way to nonstandard forms of professional transitions, often associated with precariousness and without counterparts (Kalleberg, 2009). Indeed, nonstandard careers not managed by one single company could lead to higher job insecurity, discontinuity of income, lack of skills development, restricted access to social security and exclusion of collective bargaining (Davidov, 2004; Havard et al., 2009; Keller & Seifert, 2013; Wears & Fisher, 2012). Even if some individuals benefitting from high economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), appropriate network resources (Fenwick, 2007) and knowings (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1996) may easily face these issues and avoid to fall into precariousness by detecting new business opportunities, the question is : what happens with the large majority of others? Between the ‘hierarchical’ and the ‘market’ forms of career management, novel initiatives developed by third party actors appear on the labour market in view of accompanying workers through nonstandard job transitions. These actors play an intermediary role between individual workers on a nonstandard path and the end-users of their services (the latter can no longer be considered as their employers). Moreover, in a context of growing hyperspecialization of the tasks, it becomes more and more difficult for companies to find the appropriate workers without the support of such third parties, very often through IT solutions (Malone, Laubacher, & Johns, 2011). The literature calls them Labour Market Intermediaries (LMIs).

¹ Nonstandard forms of employment could represent over one fifth of US workers (Cappelli & Keller, 2013), one third of French workers (Evaere, 2014) and one third of German workers (Keller & Seifert, 2013). Schmid (2015) shows that they represent a growing part of the total workforce in most European countries.

Our ambition is to better understand the role of those LMIs by designing an original analytical grid likely to describe their way of working. Under what conditions are they emerging? What are their main purposes? Where are the actors offering these solutions coming from? To what extent are they leading to new forms of labour market regulation? Our paper is divided into three main sections. In a first step, we show the existing literature on Labour Market Intermediaries (LMIs) may partially contribute to answer some of these questions. In a second step, we gradually develop each criterion of our analytical grid. In a third and last step, we discuss our results and present two opposite situations in the support offered by LMIs to secure nonstandard professional paths.

Labour market intermediaries as a support to nonstandard careers

Various studies have tried to characterize the role and functions of LMIs. Referring to previous distinctions developed by Autor (2008), Bonet, Cappelli and Hamori (2013) propose to split them into three categories. The first category of LMIs gathers information about vacant posts as well as the jobseeker's skills and profiles, like on line job boards. Bonet et al. (2013) call them 'information providers' as they step in the relationship between the worker and the potential user until each of them becomes aware of the other's existence. The second category ('matchmakers') gathers LMIs that resolve matching problems such as finding a job for the worker or finding a candidate for the organization: selection and recruitment agencies are good examples of this. Their involvement runs until the relationship between the worker and the user begins. In the third category, Bonet et al. (2013) group LMIs that conduct their business throughout the entire period of the worker-user relationship. Such 'administrators' may take responsibility for wages and other administrative aspects of the employment relationship, and even become the workers' legal employer, providing them to clients, like temporary work agencies or professional employer organizations.

Benner (2003) suggests another differentiation among LMIs, based on their status. They may belong either to the for-profit sphere or to the public sector or again they may be membership-based (professional associations or trade unions). In the latter case, several studies explore the development of quasi-unions that aim at increasing the capability for voice of workers who face the risks of nonstandard career paths (Heery & Adler, 2004; Jenkins,

2013; Sullivan, 2010). Quasi-unions are self-organized structures and do not act according to the traditional rules of collective bargaining. Their members can be ‘supporters’ who take part in specific collective actions, ‘registered members’ to websites/social media or ‘paying members’ who pay a yearly subscription fee to support the activities.

For Autor (2008), it is very important to consider the nature of participation in LMI’s activities: is it voluntary or compulsory and for which parties? Answering this question directly illustrates the kind of information asymmetry LMIs want to redress and therefore their economic function on the labour market.

Brulin and Svensson (2012) propose to distinguish the roles of LMIs according to their potential contribution to HR innovation: meeting places destined to share experiences, facilitators of contacts likely to support the growth of networks or motors of regional economic development by launching long-lasting projects.

All these studies refer to the various ways in which intermediaries can take responsibility for matching supply with demand in the framework of flexible labour markets. Even if such typologies enhance our understanding of intermediation mechanisms, most of them focus on only one specific dimension such as the status (public, market, community-based) or the role played by LMIs with respect to workers (information provider, matchmaker, administrator). Throughout our empirical observations, we are however confronted with many other emergent dimensions corresponding to the following questions:

- **Where** do LMIs come from (and how do they emerge onto the labour market)?
- **Who** is responsible for the matchmaking process?
- **When** do they intervene for securing the professional path?
- **How** do they accompany professional transitions?
- **What** kind of information do they produce and diffuse on the labour market?
- **Why** do they intervene on the labour market (and what are their justifications)?

These questions lead us to develop a set of distinctive criteria likely to characterize the support offered by LMIs to the steering of nonstandard careers. More than a middle range

descriptive theory that could be applied on LMIs, our analytical grid will emphasize different ways of securing nonstandard career paths.

Presentation of the differentiation criteria

We will now describe the key dimensions of our conceptual grid. These dimensions correspond to the abovementioned questions generated in order to compare concrete cases of LMI to each other. We here consider as users the organizations or clients that need the work done (Bonet et al., 2013). Workers offer their services to users through LMIs that act as an intermediate body in a triangular employment relationship. For each criterion, we will detail its different modalities according to theoretical distinctions found in the literature.

Partnership logic

A first thematic orientation in the literature concerns the origins of LMIs: where do they come from? What are the partnership logics explaining their development? Benner (2003) suggests an interesting differentiation among LMIs, based on their statuses. They may belong either to the for-profit sphere (temp'agencies) or to the public sector (public employment agencies) or again they may be membership-based (professional associations or trade unions).

Three partnership logics may thus be distinguished for any triangular employment (LMI/user/worker). The first mechanism –outsourcing– reflects the tendency of many organisations to offload a part of their activities, basically for reasons of cost reduction and flexibility (Bidwell & Keller, 2014). Workforce brokers, staffing firms (Laubacher & Malone, 2002), or again temp' agencies (Benner, Brownstein, Dresser, & Leete, 2001; Bernhardt, Hatton, Pastor & Zimmerman, 2001; Davidov 2004) are concrete illustrations of LMIs answering this kind of demand and developing specific niches on the labour market, in order to match the requests of clients and optimize their performances. They may be focused on

specific business sectors (IT, finance, building), positions (employees, middle managers, executives) or professions (nurses, engineers, technicians).

Mutualisation is the second mechanism we may observe, that refers to the growing importance of collaborative partnerships enabling to deal with the challenges of a global economy and/or to optimize the value chain (Miles & Snow, 1995). The mutualisation process can originate either from users or from workers themselves. In both cases, a new third-party structure is created and is given a specific mandate (Xhaufclair & Pichault, 2012).

Let us consider mutualisation by users. Laubacher and Malone (2002) provide a description of ‘regionally-based organizations’, belonging to the same area (employers, local authorities, unions, professional associations, social enterprises and schools), facing similar employment problems and trying to find appropriate responses to these challenges. Kock, Wallo, Nilsson and Höglund (2012) examine the activities of what they call ‘human resource intermediaries’, at the junction of outsourcing and mutualisation processes: 1) they deliver advices and undertake parts of HRM operations that users no longer want to operate such as training, assessing or outplacing; 2) they are created by and belong directly to the group of users they serve.

Finally, we can find mutualisation by workers either in the ‘career communities’ studied by Parker, Arthur & Inkson (2004) or the ‘membership-based organizations’ explored by Benner et al. (2001), Benner (2003) and Bernhardt et al. (2001): in this situation, workers unite in order to develop a common network of contacts, to share information and knowledge, to be provided with training, to access facilities dedicated to collective activities, etc. In a similar perspective, several studies pay attention to the raise of quasi unions that aim at

increasing the capability for voice of workers facing the risks of nonstandard career paths (Heery & Adler, 2004; Sullivan, 2010; Jenkins, 2013). Quasi unions are self-organized structures and do not act according to the traditional rules of collective bargaining. Their members can be ‘supporters’ who take part in specific collective actions, ‘registered members’ to websites/social media or ‘paying members’ who pay a yearly subscription fee to support the activities.

Responsibility for matchmaking

A second thematic dimension in the literature refers to the role played by LMIs in triangular employment relationships, with a particular focus on the matchmaking process. Who takes the responsibility for establishing a link between workers’ skills and clients’ needs? Or again, ‘who’s in the driving seat?’ (Truss, 2004).

The role of intermediaries may consist in reacting to users requirements by offering them a customized answer. This applies, in particular, to temp’, outplacement or executive search agencies. In this case, Bonet et al. (2013) consider that LMIs play a role of direct matchmakers, even if the final decision still belongs to users.

LMIs may also act as a service supplier during job transitions (Autor, 2008; Benner et al., 2001; Bernhardt et al., 2001; Bonet et al., 2013; Kock et al., 2012; Laubacher & Malone, 2002; Parker et al., 2004). They deliver various services such as networking activities –with potential employers and colleagues– or information on vacant positions. They can provide workers with training and offer them the access to facilities for individual and/or collective activities, which reinforces their feeling of belonging to a community. Such solutions help

workers in establishing links between their skills and users requirements, but the matchmaking process is now in the hands of the workers themselves.

Aside from these two modalities, the responsibility for matchmaking may be directly given to users. This possibility already existed in some specific labour markets like the artistic sector in which the matchmaking process is based on reputational effects directly leading users towards well-known professionals (Menger, 1991). It is currently mushrooming through the development of online platforms (Stanton & Thomas, 2016). In this third modality, LMIs create the conditions of a potential matching and facilitate the circulation of workers among different users but the latter play the role of matchmakers by selecting themselves the workers they want to hire.

Prevailing regulatory framework

Let's now consider a third thematic dimension likely to describe the activity of LMIs: when do they intervene for securing career paths? This question was already approached by Bonet et al. (2013) but, as discussed earlier, there is no systematic link, in our view, between the duration of the triangular relation and the role played by LMIs vis-à-vis the matchmaking process. The literature devoted to the evolution of social protection on flexible labour markets (Gautié, 2003; Marsden, 2004; Supiot, 1994, 2001) offers an interesting alternative answer by considering the prevailing regulatory framework each LMI refers to².

Three basic ways through which LMIs secure nonstandard career paths may be distinguished: 1) continuous labour rights through a regular employment contract (whatever

² The following analytical categories are linked to institutional contexts in which the social security system is based on a collective redistribution of resources such as unemployment allowances or access to healthcare benefits.

may be the user); 2) discontinuous labour rights via a succession of temporary employment contracts giving access to social entitlements, i.e. collective rights linked to the welfare state; or 3) ‘transitional’ rights, transcending previous distinctions between continuity and discontinuity and leading to a series of rights independent from any contractual situation.

In the first case, LMIs secure each professional transition (between two missions or during a training period) through a continuous employment contract that guarantees a permanent access to labour rights. To a certain extent, this solution is an attempt to rebuild an internal labour market (Doeringer & Piore, 1971) through triangular employment relationships. In the second case, LMIs only support workers when they work: their access to labour rights is thus discontinuous due to the temporary nature of their work contracts. Between two contracts, workers benefit from social entitlements (e.g.: unemployment allowances) stemming from their previous employment contracts. Social rights are thus here prevalent. In the third case, LMIs offer an access to a series of rights (insurance packages, training, financial support for developing activities, administrative support opening access to social entitlements) that can be activated by workers whatever their professional status (employee, trainee, unemployed, in parental leave, etc.). These ‘transitional’ rights (Gazier & Gautié, 2011; Gaudu, 2008; Schmid & Gazier, 2002) thus become portable, beyond the discontinuity of work situations. They need to be organized either on a local or regional basis via “written agreements between two or more partners to reach a common goal through procedural security” (Schmid, 2015, p. 88): they do not require any legal framework.

HRM services

A fourth dimension characterizing the role of LMIs in the literature is the kind of HRM support provided by LMIs to nonstandard career paths. In other terms, how do they accompany professional transitions? Brulin & Svensson (2012) distinguished the roles of LMIs according to their potential contribution to HRM innovation: meeting places destined to share experiences (most often around administrative rules), facilitators of contacts likely to support the growth of networks or motors of regional economic development by launching long-lasting projects (the two latter most often around HR development). Kock et al. (2012) show the majority of human resource intermediaries are given short-term assignments (“firefighting activities”) while a more strategic involvement in terms of HR development is much rarely observed.

By referring to the configurational approach developed by Delery and Doty (1996) or Verburg, Dan Hartog and Koopman (2007), three conceptual modalities may thus be distinguished. The HRM package provided by LMIs may comprise a full range of services, combining compliance to administrative rules and commitment to organizational goals. The two other possibilities just offer a part of these services: either administrative support (workforce planning, working time arrangements and wage payment) or HR development (assessment, training and skill development). To a certain extent, we can here refer to the well-known opposition between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ HRM strategies (Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, Mc Govern & Stiles, 1997), the former being focused on transactional aspects and the latter on more relational aspects. The three modalities of HRM support may thus be distinguished into hard, soft or combined HRM packages.

Information produced

A fifth thematic dimension presented in the literature refers to the function of LMIs as information producers. It answers the following question: what kind of information do they produce and diffuse on the labour market? For Autor (2008), a closely interlinked question is the nature of participation in LMI's operations: is it voluntary or compulsory and for which parties? Answering this question directly reflects the kind of information asymmetry LMIs want to redress and therefore their economic function on the labour market.

By contrast with standardised markets, services exchanged on the labour market are unique and not comparable to each other due to their multidimensional and uncertain character (Karpik, 2007). We must however recognize that the information circulates on the labour market through multiple institutions and conventions (database referencing individual workers' competences, list of vacant positions, new legislation, etc.). In this perspective, the way in which it is produced and diffused by LMIs seems crucial (Bessy & Eymard-Duvernay, 1997). Is this information either standardised (according to extant conventions in data bases and directories) or unique and specific? Do LMIs limit their action to collecting available information, or do they transform it into original and added value products? Is this information offered in open access or in a more limited way? Answering these questions unavoidably leads to exploring the audience targeted by LMIs.

Bessy & Chauvin (2013) consider market intermediaries —including LMIs— may be characterized by the valuation activities they deliver. They can be classified into distributors (buying and selling information platforms), matchmakers (putting parties into relation), consultants (producing advices through their expertise) and evaluators (assessing individuals and organizations). The kind of information they produce on the labour market may vary according to the level of dispersion (distributed versus concentrated), the temporality (short-

term versus long-term) and the level of generality (standardized versus singular) of the valuation frame they establish.

We will here consider three modalities of access to information produced by LMIs: the latter may be accessible to everyone (open access), restricted to network members (limited access) or kept confidential (closed access). The more the access is open, the higher the probability of standardized/long-term information and voluntary participation of users and workers. Inversely, the more the access is closed, the higher the probability of unique/short-term information and compulsory (or paying) participation for being entitled to benefit from the LMI's services.

An open access to the information produced by LMIs tends to reduce information asymmetry (Autor, 2008) by enhancing the capacity of workers to monitor job transitions by themselves while a closed access to information diminishes the probability to be fully responsible for one's professional path. The other situations, in which the access to information is restricted, depend on the level of formalization: the more information is standardized, the less workers are made responsible for managing their career.

Institutional innovativeness

Our last descriptive question concerns the reasons why LMI intervene on the labour market and the justifications they provide to their intervention. It leads to a last criterion in the analytical comparison of LMIs attempting to secure nonstandard professional transitions: the extent to which they want to transform the current functioning of the labour market. This criterion refers to the innovative potential of each initiative, i.e., its institutional innovativeness.

Nonstandard work arrangements challenge the usual way of working of most Western labour markets, still based on binary (employee/self-employed statuses), bilateral (employer/worker) and standardised (open ended full-time contracts) employment models (Berns, Docquir, Frydman, Hennebel, & Lewkowicz, 2007; Kalleberg, 2000; Regalia, 2006). In order to understand how LMIs can initiate institutional changes on the labour market, we found in institutional theories (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009) an interesting explanatory basis. Institutional theories lead us to pay attention to the pressures for change in a specific field, the strategies developed to cope with nonstandard career paths and the kind of disruptive tools offered, and the ability to federate stakeholders from various backgrounds.

Some LMIs strictly conform to the current state of the labour market and their actions remain anchored in the conventional scheme of employment relationships. Even if triangular employment arrangements replace bilateral relations, they do not pretend to promote institutional innovations. We will consider they are submitted to institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Other LMIs tend to develop different kinds of ‘institutional bricolage³’ in order to cope with the cognitive and cultural gaps in the current functioning of the labour market vis-à-vis nonstandard career paths.

A third category of LMIs goes beyond bricolage by attempting to transform the rules of the game in a more disruptive way and designing radically new employment schemes, far beyond the traditional distinctions between continuity and discontinuity of rights (see above).

The last criterion of our grid explore the extent to which LMIs tend to strictly conform to the existing way of working of the field (institutional isomorphism), experiment unusual devices (institutional bricolage) or again develop and diffuse radically new employment schemes likely to transform the current rules of the game (institutional innovation).

³ Based on Levi-Strauss’ work, Baker and Nelson (2005) define bricolage as ‘making do with whatever is at hand’ (2005, p. 330). According to them, ‘entrepreneurial bricolage’ means that people refuse to comply with the usual limitations of the field (e.g.: rules and standards) and support or suggest institutional innovations to experiment new institutional forms. This concept is not far from the notion of ‘institutional experimentation’ developed by Malsch and Gendron (2013), used to emphasize the fragile and unpredictable process underlying any institutional work.

Two opposite ways of securing nonstandard career paths

We are now able to develop the entire analytical grid by linking up the six dimensions presented here above. This will lead us to a systematic comparison of the diverse ways in which LMIs can support nonstandard professional transitions.

A detailed observation of table 1 (next page) highlights two opposite situations that can be viewed as ideal-types. LMIs resulting either from outsourcing needs or from partnerships among users perform like conventional players on the labour market. The usual bilateral employment relationship is here transformed into a triangular relationship but remains fundamentally based on employment contracts. Such LMIs take care of the worker as a regular employer: they provide a full range of integrated HR services, they are in charge of placing workers onto missions (jobmatching), they limit the access to the information they produce, and they basically conform to the way in which the labour market is currently organized. We can say that they offer stability by reconstructing extended internal labour markets (primacy of labour rights). In this case, workers may be considered ‘as if’ they were ‘quasi-employees’, even if their daily management is supervised by users.

Table 1. Characterizing the actions of LMIs via a multidimensional grid.

Criteria	QUASI EMPLOYEE		QUASI SELF-EMPLOYED
Partnership logic (Where?)	Outsourcing	Mutualisation by user companies	Mutualisation by workers
Responsibility for matchmaking (Who?)	LMIs	User companies	Workers themselves
Prevailing regulatory framework (When?)	Labour rights	Social rights	Transitional rights
HR configurations (How?)	HR development & administrative support (compliance & commitment)	HR development (commitment)	Administrative support (compliance)
Availability of	Closed access	Limited access	Open access

information produced (What?)			
Institutional innovativeness (Why?)	Institutional isomorphism	Institutional bricolage	Institutional innovation

LMIs originated from a mutualisation process among workers operate in a very different way. They are primarily destined to answer workers' needs and to improve their working conditions. They are not attempting to act as a substitutive employer and do not offer integrated HRM services: they mainly provide administrative support. They aim at softening nonstandard job transitions on external labour markets by experimenting unusual formulas and developing 'functional equivalents' to the traditional employment relationship (Marsden, 2004): customized insurances packages or expense accounts transformed into remuneration statements for instance. They explicitly want to test the limits of the current functioning of the labour market through administrative (re)engineering. Such process of institutional experimentation (Malsch & Gendron, 2013), reinforced by an intensive activity of theorization (Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002) through various discursive practices, paves the way to institutional innovations that make workers in transition fully responsible for their career, 'as if' they were self-employed (primacy of transitional rights).

Between these two extreme situations, many other possibilities may emerge according the variations of each criterion. Our multidimensional grid is an attempt to enrich existing typologies provided by the literature (Autor, 2008; Benner, 2003; Bonet et al., 2013) by an in-depth description of the support offered by LMIs when they try to secure nonstandard professional transitions. Using contrasted ideal-types helps to grasp the complex diversity of roles and modalities of action developed by LMIs. It also contributes to a better understanding of the way in which modern career management is reshaped: on the one hand (quasi employee pole), third-party actors become themselves employers, establishing a complex triadic relationship with the user (co-employment); on the other hand (quasi self-employed pole), they become prime partners of user organizations, taking care of the administrative aspects of the contractual relationships (billing, insurance packages, etc.). In the latter case, they can act

as quasi-unions, voicing workers' concerns vis-à-vis the user and negotiating better working conditions⁴.

We may observe that once the support offered by LMIs goes away from the traditional employment patterns and moves towards the 'quasi self-employed' pole, a radical shift seems to occur in the purpose of securing nonstandard career paths: *it is no longer a question of reinforcing the employment relationship itself but rather a question of smoothing out the access to social entitlements and incomes through professional transitions*. Such LMIs certainly offer relevant answers to the profound changes occurring on the labour market, under the aegis of the Active Welfare State (Van Berkel, de Graaf & Sirovatka, 2011) and the Active Labour Market Policies (David, Jochen, & Weber, 2010). They may be viewed as a first concrete achievement of the so-called 'transitional labour markets' (Gazier & Gautié, 2011), in which the access to social rights can be activated by workers whatever their professional status, and thus become portable from one working situation to another.

However, the growing importance of LMIs considering workers as quasi self-employed could lead to a gradual lack of differentiation among statuses, under the generic label of 'autonomous work' and thanks to the functional equivalents to the conventional employment relationship provided by LMIs. In those conditions, the probability is high that employers no longer feel obliged to fulfil their responsibilities as managers of the employment relationship and may act as simple users of the workforce. On the workers' side, this phenomenon might reveal a tacit recognition of the 'casualization' of their careers, for which they now become fully responsible, as an illustration of the subjectification process (Foucault, 1988) by which contemporary individuals are constituted as subjects and internalize time and work pressure in a kind of heroic commitment vis-à-vis the project rhetoric (Cicmil, Packendorff & Lindgren, 2016). Such a dissociation of legal and managerial responsibilities over professional transitions obviously raises the question of the kind of criteria that may guide the actions of LMIs (Davidov, 2004; Wears & Fisher, 2012) in order to avoid increased dualities and precariousness on the labour market (Kalleberg, 2009). Employment policy makers must be

⁴ See the recent initiatives taken by Dynamo with the "Dear Jeff Bezos Campaign" directly addressed to the CEO of Amazon or again by Freelancers Union asking the candidates at the presidential elections to recognize the contribution of freelancers to the US economy and to support their actions.

aware of these issues and design regulative actions accordingly if they want to offer a sustainable support to workers engaged in nonstandard career paths.

Conclusion

Our paper tends to provide two main contributions to the literature on careers, in a context of nonstandard professional transitions. First, it offers an integrated analytical framework for exploring the different ways by which LMIs attempt to secure nonstandard career paths. While the extant literature on LMIs often delivers one-dimensional typologies, our multidimensional grid scrutinizes the answers given to 6 questions: 1) where do LMIs come from? 2) who is responsible for the matchmaking process? 3) when do LMIs secure career paths? 4) how do they support professional transitions? 5) what kind of information do they produce and diffuse on the labour market? 6) why do they intervene on the labour market? Such an extended analytical framework allows a fine-tuned understanding of the roles and modalities of action of LMIs on the contemporary labour market.

Second, it emphasizes important managerial and societal challenges linked to two opposite situations: the quasi-employee and the quasi-self-employed ideal-types. In both cases, significant changes are provoked in traditional career management. The former extends the internal labour markets to triangular employment relationships, without significantly changing the rules of the game, while the latter tries to support workers on external labour markets through the development of functional equivalents to the traditional employment relationship. In this last situation, we can observe a significant change in the purpose of securing professional paths, with a focus on guaranteeing the access of workers to social entitlements through their professional transitions, whatever their status on the labour market, in line with the promoters of ‘transitional labour markets’ (Gazier & Gauthié, 2011).

Our paper shows the necessity to define normative criteria likely to evaluate the solutions offered by LMIs and to equip policy makers with relevant guidelines for their regulative actions (Regalia, 2006). A future research agenda could be devoted to specify, through dialogues with key labour market experts, the conditions under which a sustainable support may be provided to nonstandard professional transitions. At an individual level, we

could explore the contribution of each LMI to a better job quality for autonomous workers (Davoine & Erhel, 2007; Muñoz de Bustillo, Fernandez-Macias, Anton, & Esteve, 2009; Van Aerden, Moors, Levecque, & Vanroelen, 2015). At an organizational level, we could examine the extent to which the support offered by LMIs really enhances the employability of individual workers while maintaining a freedom of choice, based on capacitation processes and the creation of new solidarities (Sen, 2005). In particular, it would be relevant to scrutinize the relations LMIs can develop with conventional workers unions – that tend to expand in new segments of the labour market, traditionally less organized– and ‘quasi unions’ – that aim at increasing the voice capacity of workers not represented in traditional unions (Heckscher & Carré, 2006). The ability of conventional workers unions to influence local trade-offs between labour flexibility and employment security policies in multinational companies has been studied by Pulignano et al., (2016): the question remains open for nonstandard workers who often voice themselves their concerns and requests, as shown by Osnowitz (2010) in her study on independent contractors... It is also possible that LMIs act themselves as quasi unions. As suggested by Mironi (2010), new and evolving forms of representation and voice, crossing individual-collective dimensions with direct-represented dimensions, must be found according to the multiple and interacting employment models in contemporary organizations. At a societal level, we could study the conditions under which the actions of LMIs may lead to an evolution of the current functioning of the labour market and to the development of relevant employment policies, more adapted to the growing importance of project-based work.

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